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ERICH FROMM

THE ART OF BEING

The Art of Being

Erich Fromm

Edited and with a Foreword by Rainer Funk

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A Biography of Erich Fromm

Editor's Foreword

Between 1974 and 1976, while working on the book *To Have Or to Be?* at his home in Locarno, Switzerland, the aged Erich Fromm wrote far more manuscript and chapters than were actually used in the book, which was published in 1976. Some of these chapters are contained in the present volume. They deal entirely with the "steps toward being" that the individual can take in order to learn "the art of being."

Fromm withdrew the chapters on "Steps toward Being" from the typescript shortly before the typesetting of *To Have Or to Be?* because he believed that his book could be misunderstood to mean that each individual has *only* to search for spiritual wellbeing in the awareness, development, and analysis of himself without changing the economic realities that produce the having mode. The roots of the mass phenomenon of orientation toward "having," which are typical of a luxuriant society that has everything, were to be sought for in the economic, political, and social realities of modern industrial society, especially in its organization of labor, and in its modes of production.

Despite the fact that our orientation toward having is rooted in the structural realities of today's industrial culture, the overcoming of these realities consists in rediscovering man's own psychic, intellectual, and physical powers and in his possibilities of self-determination. For this reason, these "Steps toward Being" are now being published. They are intended to be a guide to productive self-awareness.

Recent trends have certainly made it clear that the awareness, realization, development, etc., of one's self almost always mean something other than the enhancement of one's own subjective powers. Today, by and large, individual narcissism is simply being strengthened and the inability to reason and to love (which, according to Fromm, are characteristics of an

orientation toward being) entrenched, as techniques of self-awareness offer new crutches of orientation toward having.

The following summary of some of the statements made earlier in *To Have Or to Be?* is meant not to be a substitute for having read that book, but rather to remind all who have read it of its most important thoughts.

Erich Fromm understood the alternatives having or being to be "two fundamental modes of existence, or two different kinds of orientation toward self and the world, two different types of character structure whose respective dominance determines the totality of how a person thinks, feels, and acts." If one investigates all the possible ways in which a person can orient his life, then one comes to this conclusion: In the end, a person orients his life either toward having or toward being.

What does it mean when someone ultimately orients his or her life toward having?

Whoever orients his or her life toward having determines oneself, one's existence, one's meaning of life, and one's way of life according to what one has, what that person can have, and what one can have more of. Now, there is almost nothing that could not become an object of having and of the desire to have: material things of all types—one's own house, money, stocks, artworks, books, stamps, coins, and other things that, in part, can be amassed with "the passion of a collector."

People, too, can become the object of having or of the desire to have. Of course, one does not say that one takes possession of another person and considers that person one's property. One is more "considerate" in this regard and prefers to say that one is concerned about others and takes responsibility for them. But it is well known that whoever has the responsibility for others also has the right to dispose of them. Thus, children, the disabled, the old, the sick, and those in need of care are taken possession of and considered to be a part of one's own self—and woe! should the sick become healthy and the child wish to decide for itself. Being determined by the having mode then becomes obvious.

As though it were not enough that other people can be "had," we also determine the conduct of our lives by taking on or acquiring virtues and honors. All that matters to us is that we have esteem, a certain image, health, beauty, or youth, and when this is no longer possible, then we at least want to have "experience" or "memories." Convictions of a political, ideological, and religious nature can also be acquired as possessions and staunchly defended—to the point of bloodshed. Everything is made dependent upon whether one is in possession of the truth or whether one is in the right.

Virtually anything can be possessed if a person orients his way of life toward having. The issue is not whether one does or does not have something, but rather whether a person's heart is set on what he or she does or does not have. Orientation toward not-having is a having orientation, too. Fromm is not advocating asceticism; orientation toward "being" is precisely what is not identical with orientation toward "not-having." The perpetual question concerns the position that having or not-having holds in the determination of one's purpose in life and in the determination of one's own identity. It is often difficult to distinguish whether someone possesses something in the having mode of existence or, to quote Fromm, whether someone "possesses as if he were not possessing." Yet each person can quickly test himself or herself by asking what he or she finds particularly valuable, thereby getting an idea of what would happen if he or she were to lose what was important and valuable: whether he or she would lose the ground from under his or her feet and whether life would then become meaningless. If one can then no longer feel any self-reliance or self-value (intrinsic to oneself), if life and work are no longer worth anything, then one is determining life according to an orientation toward having: having a fine vocation, obedient children, a good rapport, profound insights, better arguments, and so forth.

The person who is oriented toward having always makes use of crutches rather than his or her own two feet. That person uses an external object in order to exist, in order to be oneself as he or she wishes. He or she is himself or herself only insofar as that person *has* something. The individual

determines being as a subject according to the having of an object. He or she is possessed by objects, and thus by the object of having them.

At the same time, the metaphor of crutches replacing one's own feet makes apparent what is meant by a different orientation, that of being. Just as a person has a physical capacity for self-reliance, which can be replaced with crutches if need be, so does one have psychic abilities for self-reliance, too: a capacity for love, a capacity for reason, and a capacity for productive activity. But it is also possible for a person to replace those innate psychic powers with an orientation toward having, such that a capacity for love, reason, and productive activity depends upon the possession of those objects of having upon which the heart is set.

Love, reason, and productive activity are one's own psychic forces that arise and grow only to the extent that they are practiced; they cannot be consumed, bought, or possessed like objects of having, but can only be practiced, exercised, ventured upon, performed. In contradistinction to objects of having—which are expended when they are used up—love, reason, and productive activity grow and increase when they are shared and used.

Orientation toward being always means that one's purpose in life is oriented toward one's own psychic forces. One recognizes, becomes acquainted with, and assimilates the fact that the unknown and the strange in oneself, and in the external world, are characteristic of *one's own self*. By learning this, one attains a greater and more comprehensive relationship with one's self and one's environment.

In *To Have Or to Be?* Fromm proceeded from the observation that today's orientation toward having is a mass phenomenon founded in the economic and social actualities of a society that has too much and that can, therefore, succumb to the temptation of letting itself be determined or defined by having. The enormous loss of individuals' own psychic forces can be found in the structural realities of present-day economics, of present-day organization of labor, and of present-day social life.

If the roots of the fateful development of the individual are to be sought for primarily in the socio-economically determined lot of today's person,

then it is valid to proceed on the basis of these roots and to understand the individual as having always been socialized. That is why Fromm replaced the chapter on the "Steps Toward Being" with his suggestions for structural change. And that is why an individual's efforts to shift from an orientation toward having to an orientation toward being can make sense only if those efforts simultaneously change the structure of one's own setting. In vocational activity, in the organization of one's own work, and in political and societal self-awareness, the guiding values of one's own socio-economic way of life must be changed so that one can genuinely experience one's own psychic forces of reason, love, and productive activity and so that those powers can grow by use.

Our attempt to attain self-awareness and self-development, to attain a view of ourselves and of our world that truly corresponds to inner and external reality, is connected with the liberation of our socio-economic way of life. Indeed, "Only to the degree that the practice of life is freed from its contradictions and its irrationality can the map correspond to reality," the author said in *To Have Or to Be?*

In the present volume, Erich Fromm first shows the false paths of self-awareness, just as he clearly recognized and identified them as such years ago, with all the pathos of a didact. Yet he then suggests ways of gaining self-awareness and shares with us the steps toward being that he himself has practiced daily, giving very extensive attention to *self-analysis* as an application of *psychoanalysis*.

Because the present work, available here for the first time, was not prepared for publication by Fromm himself, there was a need for occasional supplementation both of the division and systematization of the text as well as of the chapter headings.

Rainer Funk

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(Translated by Lance W. Garner)

PART I

1. On the Art of Being

In the first part of this book I have tried to describe the nature of the *having* and of the *being* modes of existence, and the consequences that the dominance of either mode has for man's wellbeing. We had concluded that the full humanization of man requires the breakthrough from the possession-centered to the activity-centered orientation, from selfishness and egotism to solidarity and altruism. In the second part of the book I want to make some practical suggestions concerning the steps that might be helpful as preparations for the effort to move toward this humanization.

The discussion of steps in the practice of the art of living must begin with the question on the answer to which all practice depends: What is the goal of living? What is life's meaning for man?

But is this really a meaningful question? Is there a reason for wanting to live, and would we rather not live if we had no such reason? The fact is that all living beings, animals and men, want to live, and this wish is paralyzed only under exceptional circumstances, such as unbearable pain or (in man) by the presence of passions such as love, hate, pride, loyalty that can be stronger than the wish to live. It seems that nature—or if you will, the process of evolution—has endowed every living being with the wish to live, and whatever he believes to be his reasons are only secondary thoughts by which he rationalizes this biologically given impulse.

We do of course need to acknowledge theoretical ideas of evolution. Meister Eckhart has made the same point in a simpler, poetic way:

> "If you ask a good man, "Why do you love God?" you will be answered: "I don't know—because he *is* God!"
>
> "Why do you love truth?"

"For truth's sake."

"Why do you love justice?"

"For the sake of justice!"

"Why do you love goodness?"

"For goodness' sake!"

"And why do you live?"

"On my honor, I don't know—I like to live!"[i]

That we want to live, that we like to live, are facts that require no explanation. But if we ask how we want to live—what we seek from life, what makes life meaningful for us—then indeed we deal with questions (and they are more or less identical) to which people will give many different answers. Some will say they want love, others will choose power, others security, others sensuous pleasure and comfort, others fame; but most would probably agree in the statement that what they want is happiness. This is also what most philosophers and theologians have declared to be the aim of human striving. However, if happiness covers such different, and mostly mutually exclusive, contents as the ones just mentioned, it becomes an abstraction and thus rather useless. What matters is to examine what the term "happiness" means for the layman as well as for the philosopher.

Even among the different concepts of happiness there is still a view shared by most thinkers: We are happy if our wishes are fulfilled, or, to put it differently, if we have what we want. The differences between the various views consist in the answer to the question "What are those needs the fulfillment of which brings about happiness?" We come thus to the point at which *the question of the aim and meaning of life leads us to the problem of the nature of human needs*.

By and large, there are two opposing positions. The first, and today almost exclusively held, position is that a need is defined entirely *subjectively*; it is the striving for something I want badly enough so that we have a right to call it a need, the satisfaction of which gives pleasure. In this

definition the question is not raised what the source of the need is. It is not asked whether, as with hunger and thirst, it has a physiological root, or, like the need for refined food and drink, for art, for theoretical thought, it is a need rooted in the social and cultural development of man, or whether it is a socially induced need like that for cigarettes, automobiles, or innumerable gadgets, or, finally, whether it is a pathological need like that for such behaviors as sadism or masochism.

Nor, in this first view, is the question raised what effect the satisfaction of the need has on a person—whether it enriches his life and contributes to his growth or whether it weakens him, stifles him, prevents growth, and is self-destructive. Whether a person enjoys the satisfaction of his desire to listen to Bach, or that of his sadism by controlling or hurting helpless people, is supposed to be a matter of taste; as long as this is what a person has a need for, happiness consists in the satisfaction of this need. The only exceptions that usually are made are those cases in which the satisfaction of a need severely damages other people or the social usefulness of the person himself. Thus the need to destroy or the need to take drugs are usually not supposed to be needs that can claim their legitimacy from the fact that their satisfaction might produce pleasure.

The opposite (or second) position is fundamentally different. It focuses on the question of whether a need is conducive to man's growth and well-being or whether it hobbles and damages him. It speaks of such needs as are rooted in man's nature and are conducive to his growth and self-fulfillment. In this second concept the purely subjective nature of happiness is replaced by an objective, normative one. Only the fulfillment of desires that are in man's interests leads to happiness.

In the first instance I say: "I am happy if I get all the pleasure I want"; in the second: "I am happy if I get what I ought to want, provided I want to attain an optimum of self-completion."

It need not be emphasized that this last version is unacceptable from the standpoint of conventional scientific thinking because it introduces a norm—i.e., a value judgment—into the picture and hence seems to deprive the

affirmation of its objective validity. The question arises, however, whether it is true that a norm has objective validity. Can we not speak of a "nature of man," and if this is so, does not an objectively definable nature of man lead to the assumption that its aim is the same as that of all living beings, namely, its most perfect functioning and the fullest realization of its potentialities? Does it then not follow that certain norms are conducive to this aim while others hamper it?

This is indeed well understood by any gardener. The aim of the life of a rosebush is to be all that is inherent as potentiality in the rosebush: that its leaves are well developed and that its flower is the most perfect rose that can grow out of this seed. The gardener knows, then, in order to reach this aim he must follow certain norms that have been empirically found. The rosebush needs a specific kind of soil, of moisture, of temperature, of sun and shade. It is up to the gardener to provide these things if he wants to have beautiful roses. But even without his help the rosebush tries to provide itself with the optimum of needs. It can do nothing about moisture and soil, but it can do something about sun and temperature by growing "crooked," in the direction of the sun, provided there is such an opportunity. Why would not the same hold true for the human species?

Even if we had no theoretical knowledge about the reasons for the norms that are conducive to man's optimal growth and functioning, experience tells us just as much as it tells the gardener. Therein lies the reason that all great teachers of man have arrived at essentially the same norms for living, the essence of these norms being that the overcoming of greed, illusions, and hate, and the attainment of love and compassion, are the conditions for attaining optimal being. Drawing conclusions from empirical evidence, even if we cannot explain the evidence theoretically, is a perfectly sound and by no means "unscientific" method, although the scientists' ideal will remain, to discover the laws behind the empirical evidence.

Now, those who insist that all so-called value judgments in reference to human happiness have no theoretical foundation do not raise the same

objection with regard to a physiological problem, although logically the case is not different. Assuming a person has a craving for sweets and cakes, becomes fat and endangers his health, they do not say: "If eating constitutes his greatest happiness, he should go on with it and not persuade himself, or let himself be persuaded by others, to renounce this pleasure." They recognize this craving as something different from normal desires, precisely because it damages the organism. This qualification is not called subjective—or a value judgment or unscientific—simply because everyone knows the connection between overeating and health. But, then, everyone also knows today a great deal about the pathological and damaging character of irrational passions such as the craving for fame, power, possessions, revenge, control, and can indeed qualify these needs as damaging, on an equally theoretical and clinical basis.

One has only to think of the "manager sickness," peptic ulcers, which is the result of wrong living, the stress produced by over-ambitiousness, dependence on success, lack of a truly personal center. There is much data that goes beyond the connection between such wrong attitudes and somatic sickness. In recent decades a number of neurologists, such as C. von Monakow, R. B. Livingston, and Heinz von Foerster, have suggested that man is equipped with a neurologically built-in "biological" conscience in which norms such as cooperation and solidarity, a search for truth and for freedom are rooted. These conceptions are based on considerations of the theory of evolution.[ii] I myself have attempted to demonstrate that the principal human norms are conditions for the full growth of the human being, while many of the purely subjective desires are objectively harmful.[iii]

The goal of living as it is understood in the following pages can be postulated on different levels. Most generally speaking, it can be defined as developing oneself in such a way as to come closest to the *model* of human nature (Spinoza) or, in other words, to grow optimally according to the conditions of human existence and thus to *become* fully what one potentially *is*; to let reason or experience guide us to the understanding of what norms

are conducive to well-being, given the nature of man that reason enables us to understand (Thomas Aquinas).

Perhaps the most fundamental form of expressing the goal and the meaning of living is common to the tradition of both the Far East and Near East (and Europe): the "Great Liberation"—liberation from the dominance of greed (in all its forms) and from the shackles of illusions. This double aspect of liberation is to be found in systems such as Indian Vedic religion, Buddhism, and Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism, as well as in a more mythical form of God as supreme king in Judaism and Christianity. It finds its crowning development (in the Near East and West) in Christian and Muslim mystics, in Spinoza, and in Marx. In all these teachings, inner liberation—freedom from the shackles of greed and illusions—is inseparably tied to the optimal development of reason; that is to say, reason understood as the use of thought with the aim to know the world as it is and in contrast to "manipulating intelligence," which is the use of thought for the purpose of satisfying one's need. This relation of freedom from greed and the primacy of reason is intrinsically necessary. Our reason functions only to the degree to which it is not flooded by greed. The person who is the prisoner of his irrational passions loses the capacity for objectivity and is necessarily at the mercy of his passions; he rationalizes when he believes he is expressing the truth.

The concept of liberation (in its two dimensions) as the goal of life has been lost in industrial society, or rather it has been narrowed down and thus distorted. Liberation has been exclusively applied to liberation from *outside forces*; by the middle class from feudalism, by the working class from capitalism, by the peoples in Africa and Asia from imperialism. The only kind of liberation that was emphasized was that from outer forces; it was essentially *political liberation*.[iv]

Indeed, liberation from outer domination is necessary, because such domination cripples the inner man, with the exception of rare individuals. But the one-sidedness of the emphasis on outer liberation also did great

damage. In the first place, the liberators often transformed themselves into new rulers, only mouthing the ideologies of freedom. Second, political liberation could hide the fact that new un-freedom developed, but in hidden and anonymous forms. This is the case in Western democracy, where political liberation hides the fact of dependency in many disguises. (In the Soviet countries the domination has been more overt.) Most importantly, one forgot entirely that man can be a slave even without being put in chains —the reverse of an oft-repeated religious statement that man can be free even when he is in chains. This may sometimes, in exceedingly rare cases, be true—however, it is not a statement that is significant for our times; but that man can be a slave without chains is of crucial importance in our situation today. The outer chains have simply been put inside of man. The desires and thoughts that the suggestion apparatus of society fills him with, chain him more thoroughly than outer chains. This is so because man can at least be aware of outer chains but be unaware of inner chains, carrying them with the illusion that he is free. He can try to overthrow the outer chains, but how can he rid himself of chains of whose existence he is unaware?

Any attempt to overcome the possibly fatal crisis of the industrialized part of the world, and perhaps of the human race, must begin with the understanding of the nature of both outer and inner chains; it must be based on the liberation of man in the classic, humanist sense as well as in the modern, political and social sense. The Church still by and large speaks only of inner liberation, and political parties, from liberals to communists, speak only about outer liberation. History has clearly shown that one ideology without the other leaves man dependent and crippled. The only realistic aim is total liberation, a goal that may well be called *radical* (or *revolutionary*) *humanism*.

Just as liberation has been distorted in industrial society, so too has the concept of reason. Since the beginning of the Renaissance, the main object that reason has tried to grasp was Nature, and the marvels of technique were the fruits of the new science. But man himself ceased to be the object of study, except, more recently, in the alienated forms of psychology,

anthropology, and sociology. More and more he was degraded to a mere tool for economic goals. In the less than three centuries following Spinoza, it was Freud who was the first to again make the "inner man" the object of science, even though Freud was handicapped by the narrow framework of bourgeois materialism.

The crucial question today is, as I see it, whether we can reconstitute the classic concept of inner and outer liberation with the concept of reason in its two aspects, as applied to nature (science) and applied to man (self-awareness).

Before beginning to make suggestions concerning certain preparatory steps in the learning of the art of living, I want to make sure that there may be no misunderstanding of my intentions. If the reader has expected that this chapter was a short prescription for learning the art of living, he had better stop here. All I want—and am able—to offer are suggestions in what direction the reader will find answers, and to sketch tentatively what some of them are. The only thing that might compensate the reader for the incompleteness of what I have to say is that I shall speak only of methods I have practiced and experienced myself.

This principle of presentation implies that I shall not try in the following chapters to write about all or even only about the most important methods of preparatory practices. Other methods such as Yoga or Zen practice, meditation centered around a repeated word, the Alexander, the Jacobson, and the Feldenkrais methods of relaxation are left out. To write systematically about all methods would require at least a volume by itself, and aside from this I would not be capable of writing such a compendium because I believe one cannot write about experiences that one has not experienced.

Indeed, this chapter could be ended right here by saying: Read the writings of Masters of Living, learn to understand the true meaning of their words, form your own conviction of what you want to do with your life; and get over the naïve idea that you need no master, no guide, no model, that you can find out in a lifetime what the greatest minds of the human species have

discovered in many thousands of years—and each one of them building with the stones and sketches their predecessors left them. As one of the greatest masters of living—Meister Eckhart—said: “How can anyone live without being instructed in the art of living and of dying?”

Yet I am not ending the book here, but shall try to present in a simple form some ideas I have learned studying the great masters.

Before even considering some of the steps that are helpful, one should be made aware of the main obstacles that stand in the way. If one is unaware of what to avoid, all of one’s efforts will be in vain.

PART II

2. Great Shams

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle to learning the art of living is what I would call the "great sham." Not as if it were restricted to the field of human enlightenment; on the contrary, the latter is only one of the manifestations of the great sham pervading all spheres of our society. Phenomena such as products with built-in obsoleteness, products that are overpriced or actually useless if not harmful to the buyer, advertising that is a blend of a little truth and much falsehood, and many other social phenomena are part of the great fake—of which the law prosecutes only the most drastic forms. Speaking merely of commodities, their real value is covered up by the value that advertising and the name and greatness of their producers suggest. How could it be otherwise in a system whose basic principle is that production is directed by the interest in maximal profit and not by the interest in maximal usefulness for human beings?

The great sham in the sphere of politics has become more visible recently through Watergate and the conduct of the Vietnam War, with its untrue statement about "near victory" or direct faking (as in false reports of aerial attacks). Yet only the tip of the iceberg of political sham has been exposed.

In the spheres of art and literature the sham is also rampant. The public, even the educated public, has largely lost its capacity to know the difference between what is genuine and what is fake. This defect is caused by several factors. Foremost of all is the purely cerebral orientation of most people. They read or listen to only *words* and intellectual concepts, and do not listen "with a third ear" for proof of the author's authenticity. To give an example: In the literature on Zen Buddhism there are writers such as D.T. Suzuki, whose authenticity is beyond doubt; he speaks of what he has experienced.

The very fact of this authenticity makes his books often difficult to read, because it is of the essence of Zen not to give answers that are rationally satisfying. There are some other books, which seem to portray the thoughts of Zen properly but whose authors are mere intellectuals whose experience is shallow. Their books are easier to understand, but they do not convey the essential quality of Zen. Yet I have found that most people who claim to have a serious interest in Zen have not noticed the decisive difference in quality between Suzuki and others.

The other reason for our difficulty to discern the difference between the authentic and the sham lies in the hypnotic attraction of power and fame. If the name of a man or the title of a book is made famous by clever publicity, the average person is willing to believe the work's claims. This process is greatly helped by another factor: In a completely commercialized society in which salability and optimal profit constitute the core values, and in which every person experiences himself as "capital" that he has to invest on the market with the aim of optimal profit (success), his inner value counts as little as that of a dental cream or a patent medicine. Whether he is kind, intelligent, productive, courageous matters little if these qualities have not been of use to make him successful. On the other hand, if he is only mediocre as a person, writer, artist, or whatever, and is a narcissistic, aggressive, drunken, obscene headline maker, he will—given some talent—easily become one of the "leading artists or writers" of the day. Of course, not only he is involved: The art dealers, literary agents, P.R. men, publishers all are interested financially in his success. He is "made" by them, and once he is a nationally advertised writer, painter, singer, once he is a "celebrity," he is a great man—just as the soap powder is the best whose name you cannot help remembering if you are a TV viewer. Of course, fake and fraud are nothing new; they have always existed. But there was perhaps no time in which the fact of being in the public eye was of such exclusive importance.

With these examples, we touch upon the sector of the great sham that is most important in the context of this book: the sham *in the field of man's salvation*, of his well-being, inner growth, and happiness.